DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 144 145 CS 501 842

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TITLE "Cheap is Beautiful": The Role of Political Analysis in Theatre Making.
PUB DATE Aug 77
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Theatre Association (Chicago, August 14-17, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cooperative Planning; *Drama; Dramatics; Financial Problems; Financial Support; Group Relations; *Political Issues; *Production Techniques; *Social Problems; *Theater Arts; Theaters

ABSTRACT

The Sunseed Repertory Collective, a touring theatre company, was formed to deal seriously with contemporary--often controversial--social and political issues. The group uses unconventional production techniques, plays in a variety of settings to a wide range of audiences, charges no admission (relying on donations after performances), and prefers original scripts that have clear relevance to the community and that can be inexpensively produced (many productions are humorous exposes of government and business tactics perceived as unfair). The company emphasizes collective script writing and directing and avoids the concept of lead roles. Major problems of the group have centered on the widespread disapproval of political emphasis in art, on the tendency of certain personalities to dominate the group, and on stresses related to the struggle to earn a minimal day-to-day living. (GW)

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"Cheap is Beautiful": The Role of Political Analysis in Theatre Making

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by Janis Molen

Jean-Luc Godard, the French film director, recently remarked: "Without a political basis, collective creation is no more than collective eating in a restaurant." Theatre-making can be an extremely self-indulgent art: it allows maximum opportunities for the expression of narcissism, exhibitionism, and autocratic assertions. On the other hand, theatre artists can be extraordinarily compassionate, self-sacrificing, and co-operative individuals.

The key to the unraveling of this contradiction is revealed in Godard's apt analogy. In order to have any real vitality, theatre-making and political analysis must be one integrated activity. Genuine theatre releases the spiritual energy of a community by expressing and clarifying its experience. If theatre artists have failed to emerge from their own self-absorption and allowed themselves to comprehend that communal experience, they have not created theatre, but pretentious rambling.

I hope to describe to you how my own theatre company has struggled with this vision of the oneness of art and politics through a point of view I call: "Towards a Cheap Theatre."

In order to create a work of art that is integral to the cultural experience, an artist must recognize the presence of positive standards and values in the community and accept the responsibility of speaking to the needs those values generate--in their own context. You must first explore the collective myth so that you may at last transcend it. Previously, this was a much easier task: traditional mythic forms were generally identifiable even though they were continually evolving in response to various social pressures. Now, though, in our global village, these

CS501 842

forms are in such flux that each artist must take on the additional task of deciding who and even where the community really is.

As American theatre artists, we have a very wide range of choices. We can attempt to play for the whole country by competing for lucrative jobs in the "entertainment industry", surviving on unemployment insurance in the struggle or we may choose to opt for the other end of the spectrum and decide to create plays wherever we may happen to be for whomever might care to experience them. Each theatre artist must ask herself or himself: who are the people I care about and want to reach? Are they the people who can afford $20 seats in a Broadway theatre, or $10 seats in a regional house, or the people down the block who have never seen live theatre? Whose interests do I want to serve? That choice must very definitely be recognized as political in nature.

Of course each artist answers that question in a unique manner. In the Napa Valley of Northern California, some seven or so theatre artists and myself have evolved a touring company which has tried to deal seriously with these issues. The group coalesced at The University of California at Berkeley in 1970 in response to the US invasion of Cambodia and was originally called Theatre for Peace. In our horror over what we considered an oppressive act of our government, we felt compelled to offer every American citizen we could reach serious artistic representation of what we perceived to be happening. We quickly developed short plays designed to jar people into political consciousness. There was no thought of attracting outside criticism of our artistic methods. We simply needed to communicate on a personal level in an intense fashion. We played anywhere, using the plays as springboards for discussion of the issues. It became the most vivid theatrical event any of us had ever experienced.

After the Cambodia period faded away, however, we went back to finishing graduate degrees in theatre and began to try to make choices about how we

wanted to function as theatre artists. In 1973, we finally formed a permanent touring company called Sunseed Repertory Collective which drew heavily on the Theatre for Peace experience. Realizing that we would be, in a sense, rather superfluous in a place like Berkeley, we moved to the Napa Valley, a semi-agricultural area famous for its grapes about 45 miles north, primarily because four of us were able to find part-time jobs teaching theatre in the local community college. Once our subsistence was developed. we began to produce plays which dealt boldly with the deep-going social conflicts around us. We designed our theatre to speak directly to those whose lives usually are caricatured or ignored on stage.

The vast majority of our audience had never seen plays before much less works which dealt with their own reality. We charge no admission, relying on donations at the door after performances for expenses. We play in private homes, schools if all levels, stores, hospitals, juvenile-rehabilitation homes, libraries, medical clinics, communes, backyards, chicken coops, mobile-home parks, churches, fairs, clubs, grange halls, and even, occasionally, theatres.

Although obviously influenced by our agitprop experience of 1970, we have tried to broaden the scope of our material to deal generally with the sense of economic dislocation and social unrest we find all around us. We don't have a particular political program such as the dialectical materialism which gave impetus to the American proletarian theatre of the 30's. On the other hand, we are acutely aware of social injustices and speak quite sharply to specific political situations. No absolute certainties are offered to audiences. Although our plays can certainly be said to have the qualities of propaganda, our goal is simply to inform the overall judgment of our audiences and invite their particiipation in an informal discussion of the play after performances.

Another clear influence on our style as a performing group is Grotowski who came to Berkeley in the late 60's. The primary theatrical display we offer is acting technique. Our costumes are usually gathered from thrift shops. We build minimal sets (a backdrop for one show, a table for another) and rely heavily on cardboard and borrowed props. In our possession is a donated portable dimmer which controls five PARs, used for large spaces. We have recently acquired a volunteer booking agent but we generally all participate in the management of publicity. Although our company could certainly be described as a "poor theartre" in Grotowski's terms, we prefer to think of it in a less austere fashion as "cheap theatre." Cheap in both senses: it is tacky and it is inexpensive.

Whether we do serious or comic pieces, we use tacky materials and banal situations as an ironic comment on our materialistic culture. Since our clientele ranges from retired people to the mentally-retarded to school children, we have established a free admission policy which is not subject to change. If a group requires donations from its members, we refuse to perform. General donations from a group treasury, however, are another story. So far, our fund-raising efforts outside our community have not met with any success.

Since we do take on the Establishment, our lack of foundation support comes as no surprise. Of course we would appreciate some occasional relief from a subsistence existence, but not at the cost of changing our material. Although the types of plays produced vary enormously, Sunseed's general commitment is to collectively developed original scripts with clear relevance to our community, inexpensively mounted, and of a professional quality. We find the proper spectator-actor relationship for each type of production and embody that decision in the physical arrangements of it, never utilizing proscenium designs.

Several predominant contemporary themes run throughout the plays which vary from very serious psychological studies to the broadest of farces.

A primary one is the breakdown of the macho authoritarian culture brought on both by the women's movement and the fall of Nixon and his ilk. We have addressed this theme directly in a show called Wonder Women Meets the Cardboard Stud which was produced in conjunction with the Napa Valley Women's Center and indirectly in every show by various means, the most explicit one being a practice of having women play men's parts and vice versa. This strong concern with changing sexual roles dovetails neatly into another contral theme: the difficulties of communal living as a replacement for the nuclear family as a long-term survival tactic. Another piece, Six to a Bathroom, confronted this practical problem concretely: we actually played ourselves as well as characters in the action. Long personal soliloquies interrupted scenes at critical moments.

Aside from these recurring emotional issues, Sunseed often harks back to its agitprop roots with comedy-exposes. Of course our first satire was directed at the local wine industry and it is regularly revived as a Christmas pageant: "For unto you is born this day, in the city of Rutherford, a saviour, which is Cabernet Sauvignon." Another, called Food Follies, took on agribusiness and dealt with reasons for escalating food prices offered to consumers by various business and government interests, who emerged as show-biz personsalities. Earl Butz turned up as a two-faced ventriloquist-dummy routine. I played John Wayne as the absentee farmer and came galloping on with a cardboard horse. The corporate farmer was Chiquita Banana, acted by a male adept at the cha-cha. The show culminated in a TV quiz show where the consumers vied for the prize of being first to "Eat for a Day." Ho-ho Crow, the manager-narrator punctuated this splashy action with didactic jokes. The audiences were all given long programs which contained information on how to beat high food prices.

Our current production, called Cruise to Paradise, is a takeoff on the

tedious plots of disaster movies and explores the issue of labor relations. This show was inspired by the fact that the local community college where we teach maintains a faculty which is 80% part-time and temporary. These teachers receive one-third the pay received by full-timers for the same services with no fringe benefits or job security of any kind. Somehow, we have found ourselves at the very center of a class-action law suit which challenges these practices and is now at the California Supreme Court level. During the course of this play, the captain of a cruise ship who thinks he is Gene Hackman, plants a bomb on board in order to be seen as the herioc rescuer He then discovers that he has been re-classified as a part-time captain, part-time purser by the efficiency expert hired by his corporate bosses. The crew eventually abandons ship, leaving the brawling tourists standed on an iceberg.

Sunseed's other interests include profaning traditional dramatic fars such as children's shows and "the Classics." The Empress's New Clothes was a singing-dancing-slapstick adaptation of the old story and featured "the Six Million Dollar Woman." In it, we tried to deal with the obsession with appearances and clothes bred into female children at an early age. The set was a giant closet and mirror. One of our re-worked classics was Lope de Vega's Fuenteovejuna which was produced at the time Nixon was overthrown. It addressed the fact that his downfall did not represent fundamental change. This show was staged as a tour led by a tour guide who provided the audience with commentary as they encountered various historical tableaux. They ended up in the middle of a revolt scene where the tyrannical overlord was beheaded.

One low-energy summer when we couldn't agree on a piece, we arrived at a choice by drawing a title out of a hat. Stuck with the Merchant of Venice, we re-worked it so that the audience followed various scenes around thirteen acres of ranchland with the help of a map. The audience ate and drank in this show which emphasized a "rotary-club" atmoshere. At the end, Shylock was stabbed and

thrown into a lake. The setting sun always provided dazzling lighting effects against the clouds and mountains.

Last summer, Moliere's Misanthrope became a sick mood piece about inbreeding. It was always produced at parties so that scenes occurred simultaneously in various rooms throughtout the houses we played in. It was punctuated by extraneous information about the college law suit and featured a three minute plastic period for improvised scenes. Again, the audiences were encouraged to eat, drink, and socialize while they selectively focused on whatever struck their fancy.

In four years, we have produced fourteen major and four minor pieces. Sunseed has also developed a Super-8 film production company which has so far put together one hour-long feature called "Two Dogs or Welcome to the Evening News." In all of these works, there is a deliberate effort made to avoid the concept of lead roles: if an actor does play a lead, he or she fades to the back-ground for the next production. Generally, however, the scripts are written in such a way to equalize individual parts and stress group identities. Writing and directing tasks are also collectively managed: rehearsals start with long discussion periods in order to arrive at a cohesive directorial vision. Then, whoever is not acting in a scene can volunteer to direct it. Tasks are distributed in such a way that each performer has ample opportunity to develop most theatre skills. Newcomers obviously take quite a while to completely adjust to this method. When we do bog down, rehearsals are postponed while we concentrate on quasi-encounter groups.

We have given over 500 performances and played to thousands, mostly residents of the Napa Valley. Our annual revenues rarely go over one thousand dollars. The local daily newspaper, the Napa Register, remains hostile to us although the weekly county paper once did a long feature on us. Reviews come erratically. We rely for publicity on our bulk mailer, paid advertisements, and word-of-mouth. Our notoriety helps.

It is clear that many people do not approve of political emphasis in art. No matter how highly skilled the performers or how subtle the production values, they can dismiss the whole experience if they perceive it as openly political. Even when we live in a period when all manner of materials, activities, and subjects are accepted as artworthy, overt politics remains virtually the only taboo. In every group for which we play, no matter how homogeneous their interests, there will be some who adore us and some who walk out. The degree of political effect in our productions varies enormously. In general, our art is not manipulative. Our primary purpose is to confirm a certain world-view based on our subject matter and style.

As with any ensemble, certain personalities tend to dominate. Although this dynamic has often been very productive in promoting cohesive styles and ideas, it is in the long run detrimental to the artistic vitality of the group, particularly since this group devotes enormous energy to avoid just such a dynamic. So far, we have not come to terms with this problem. Indeed, as time goes by, it becomes more profound: less experienced actors are attracted to the group in order to learn more sophisticated techniques and by our leftist aura. But true acceptance into the hard-core group becomes less and less attainable. Alienation is the inevitable result and everyone loses. Furthermore, since the dominating personalities are male, we tend to find ourselves engaged in battles of the sexes, a situation which horrifies and paralyzes us in the face of our strong commitment to work toward a feminist world-view. The overall experience provided by the stresses between participatory democracy and the need for discipline and organization in addition to our internal grappling with sexism can overwhelm the stoutest of stouthearts.

All theatres have to con, crawl, beg, plead, and promise in order to survive economically. Commercial theatre does so so it can carve out a niche in bourgeois society. Theatre such as ours, which refuses to price itself out of our audience's reach, must still confront the obstacle of our day-to-day material existence. Even earning a minimal living these days, however, can be a devastating moral experience. The only jobs available in this economic squeeze are those which cry out for unionizing. We have become immersed in organizing efforts for several years just in order to make simple breadwinning a less demeaning experience. The question has now arisen: is our primary commitment to art or to immediate social change? The differences between these two tasks continue to blur. As a theatre artist, I at least have moved from an awareness of my singular talents to an immersion in my group with its hot line to a strong focus on the job to be done. I can't pretend that Sunseed's images will destroy the international corporate empires but I can refuse to work for them and those they nurture. In a society which encourages us to bond ourselves to objects rather than people, "cheap" theatre releases us to open ourselves again to each other.